

“Everyone Will Be Baptized”

Matthew 3:1-12

These are very exciting times here at Our Redeemer. We have a baptism on Saturday evening and another on Sunday morning at the late service (and one scheduled for the early service next week). How fitting it is that we turn our attention to John the Baptizer.

What a ministry he had going! Those from Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region around the Jordan River were going out to him and were being baptized. Let me tell you, walking from Jerusalem to the Jordan is no easy task. It is 18-20 miles one way with severe elevation change, very little vegetation, and no convenience stores. So why were the people eager to go out and hear John preach? Was he promising emotional fulfillment or a bigger bank account if you give your heart to the Lord? Was he teaching them the “how-to’s” of holy living? Do this and God will bless you?

No, his message was a call to repent. The people were coming out and confessing their sins. And those who did not see the need for repentance (the Pharisees and Sadducees); those who were confident in their salvation because of their own works or family heritage or they simply refuse to believe that a loving God could punish good people like them; John greeted them in absolute terms – “you brood of vipers”, you snakes, you sons of Satan, “who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?”

And wrath is coming, but so is your Redeemer. He is mightier than I. He is more important than me in every sense. I am not worthy to carry His sandals. And He is coming. John had a great message.

Last week, we began our Advent season with the announcement, “Behold, your King is coming to you.” John tells all who will listen, in no uncertain terms, He is coming, and He will baptize you. Everyone will be baptized – either with the Holy Spirit or with fire.

I know that this is not how our modern American Christian community interprets this text, but, other than on Pentecost with the tongues like fire on the heads of the disciples, fire is never associated with the good work of the Holy Spirit. Fire means tribulation and judgment. All through Scripture, the Holy Spirit comes through water; He is refreshing; He causes life and growth; He brings comfort; He washes you clean. Certainly fire can be used to purify, but that is not the Baptism in which you are really wanting to participate.

John says of the Messiah who is coming, He is going to separate the wheat from the chaff. The wheat He will gather into His barn, but the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire. Everyone will be baptized. And Baptism has an eternal aspect to it.

The washing with water and the Word is not just an event celebrated for one day. It is not just something that says you are now a part of the church or this congregation. He who believes and is baptized shall be saved – and shall be refreshed and full of life and standing before our Lord in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness for all eternity – standing with all who have come out of the great tribulation; who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

And he who does not believe will be baptized with unquenchable fire for all eternity. That was John's message that all of Judea was going out to hear.

I believe we can learn something from observing John. And it speaks to why life-long participation in churches has declined over the past generation. John speaks in absolute terms. There is no wishy-washy message being preached on the banks of the Jordan River.

He was not there to teach us that we can change the world by changing our rules or attitude or our philosophy on life. Philosophy is just a fancy word for mankind's attempt to figure out how much we can get away with and still be OK with God – whoever God is as I choose to define Him.

John spoke Law and Gospel in absolute terms and we need to do the same. This does not simply mean “fire and brimstone” sermons from the pulpit and heavy-handed parenting in the home. That only leaves you in the realm of the Law.

John's message wasn't just calling people a brood of vipers, sons of Satan; you will burn with unquenchable fire. People came to him confessing their sins (actually dealing with their sins; not just sweeping them under the rug) and he washed them – a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And they were clean. And he encouraged them to bear fruit in keeping with repentance.

John dealt with sin in a way that let the people know that this is important. And there is One who is coming who is infinitely more important than me. I am not worthy to carry His sandals. But He is worthy of your undivided attention because He is the Lamb of God who takes away the

sin of the world. He is the final sacrifice on the altar of the cross. He is the One who will finally and forever defeat death.

Where we have failed in the church today is that God is allowed to be thought of as moderately important. That is not the message that was intended, but that is the message our children have heard and learned over the last generation or two.

It has been a recurring message I have spoken over the past month here at Our Redeemer, but either God is of no importance and we are all wasting our time, or He is of infinite importance; and being baptized, receiving Christ's body and blood, hearing the Good News of salvation in Christ is the only thing that truly matters.

This goes beyond worship attendance – although that is foundational. If you teach your children that worshiping is a “take it or leave it” kind of thing or is something we do as long as other stuff doesn't get in the way, they will learn the lesson that God is moderately important and therefore He is not the God of the Bible. The God of the Bible is infinitely important.

Your children will learn the same lesson if you are a pillar of the church on Sunday morning, but unrecognizable as a Christian the rest of the week. John says, “Repent, and bear fruit in keeping with repentance.”

John the Baptist is the Advent prophet. He came with a baptism with water for repentance and the forgiveness of sin. He came to prepare the way of the Lord, and it is infinitely important that we are prepared for the One who baptizes with the Holy Spirit and with fire. The message of John is to be our message. Everyone will be baptized when He comes. Nothing else matters. And He is coming. Amen.